WORLD CHRONICLE

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PROGRAMME: **"WORLD CHRONICLE"**

GUEST: Sharon Capeling-Alakija, Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

JOURNALISTS: Linda Fasulo, National Public Radio
Ian Steele, Press Foundation of Asia
Judy Lessing, Radio New Zealand

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SYNOPSIS

UNIFEM

Sharon Capeling-Alakija, Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), highlights her organization's efforts to help women in developing countries improve their social and economic conditions. With limited resources, she says, UNIFEM has succeeded in establishing in several developing countries, a number of small, income-generating projects designed and run by women.

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VOICE: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **WORLD CHRONICLE**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns and this is a special edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

For millions of women particularly in the third world countries, the struggle for survival and environmental protection are inseparable. As the main providers of food, fuel and water for their families, women are among the first to suffer when land is degraded, trees disappear and water supply is polluted. To promote the role of women in the global environment debate, the United Nations Development Fund for Women or UNIFEM has established a global programme for women, environment and development. It aims to support poor women in the developing world to establish a sustainable relationship with the environment.

Our guest today, Sharon Capeling-Alakija is the Director of UNIFEM. A national of Canada, she will be interviewed by United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Linda Fasulo of National Public Radio; Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia and; Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand.

Before we talk with Ms. Capeling-Alakija, let's look at one example of how women and the environment co-exist. Our correspondent Steve Whitehouse reports:

NARRATION: In the developing world, women harness the earth's resources -- to provide food for the family, to supply water for household needs, to gather fuelwood for heating and cooking. Women are affected by activities destructive of our

natural resources. In Asia and Africa, women spend from 5 to 17 hours per week collecting fuel and carrying water. Yet, environmental projects have largely ignored women's needs.

Women's intuitive knowledge of the environment should be tapped by decision makers, says UNEP Director Joan Martin-Brown:

MARTIN-BROWN: "Environmental management is basically good housekeeping, good earth-keeping. The female half of the human race traditionally, regardless of what their roles are today, has had a long experience in managing resources. So much food, so much water, so much money, so much firewood -- so that managing prescribed resources in a sustainable way is not a mystery for women."

NARRATION: At the grassroots level, women are increasingly participating in environmental movements. Some of the success stories were presented at a global assembly of women and the environment held recently in the United States.

MARTIN-BROWN: "We found that in those success stories, there are very important messages from which we can all -- governments, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, corporations, academia."

NARRATION: The Assembly was part of the preparations for the UN Earth Summit to be held in June in Brazil which will take into consideration the role of women in shaping the environmental

agenda.

A new level of collaboration between women and men is vital for sustainable development -- for environmental management -- for good earthkeeping, for the sake of future generations.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Capeling-Alakija, could you tell us a bit about your programme? What are you doing to encourage a better understanding among women of the problems of sustainable development in relation to the environment? The introduction referred to the intuitive knowledge of women. How do you develop that? How do you work on it?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Like all of UNIFEM's programmes, we work at two levels. First of all, we work directly with grassroots women, mostly on their economic activities which are very closely linked with environmental questions and at the same time, we attempt to work at the policy level for two reasons because working strictly with women who have no control over the decisions that are actually affecting the policy environment in which they have to do their day-to-day living is not sufficiently effective. On the other hand, simple working with policy makers to change policies is not a sustainable approach because the pressure to actually make real change comes from within a country not from without so our approach has been to work both at the grassroots level working with women to give them the skills and experience and confidence that they need to negotiate a better deal for themselves and then on the other hand, to work at the policy level with decision makers so they begin to understand the effects that some of the policies that they are developing actually have on women and therefore on the society as a whole.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is a major problem the rather high percentage of

illiterate women in third world countries. As long as so many women are illiterate, surely it must be very difficult for you to get your message across.

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Well, illiteracy is one of many obstacles that women have that stand in the way of their full participation as active partners in the development of their country alongside men and there is a lot of statistical evidence now that indicates that literacy for women is one of the most significant variables with respect to the health and safety of children. I think UNICEF has produced has produced some very clear and significant studies which show that the single most important variable that they can isolate which improves the chances for the life of children is the literacy of the mother. So I think that there is a very direct link and of course women who are illiterate -- for instance, bringing this back to the environment -- cannot read directions on pesticides and so on, so immediately they are endangered by a lot of these chemicals some of which of course have been banned in the industrialized countries and then are shipped to developing countries. These women are the ones who generally are involved in the spraying of pesticides are exposed to very dangerous and toxic chemicals without even being aware and unable to read the instructions to look after their own health.

FASULO: Ms. Capeling, with the need so great of women worldwide and with limited resources, how does UNIFEM go about selecting its programmes?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: It's interesting because actually UNIFEM's total income last year was about 14m dollars and with a constituency which is approximately half the world's population, you might say who are you kidding. With 14m dollars, how can you possibly begin to address the needs of women who live in poverty in developing countries and if you were to say that, you'd be right.

UNIFEM cannot in fact respond to the needs of poor women. That may surprise you that I would sat that but you could in fact take our 14m dollars and put it into Barbados which is in fact one of the better off developing countries and you wouldn't begin to scratch the surface of the needs of women who are poor in that country alone. So we had to take a more strategic approach which is first of all to have a focus and we have focused our activities on the sectors that are of strategic importance to women in their economic activities and that is the agricultural sector and the trading industry sector because that's where women are and on the other hand, we also have to be catalytic so we choose our projects from a focus within those two sectors and then we look to see whether they are innovative and by that I mean they produce new ways of working with women that we can develop as models and bring them to scale and get other agencies with more money to develop them further. Or if they're catalytic and by that I mean by putting in some money from UNIFEM, we can attract other co-financing from larger donors then we can bring these projects to scale so those are the ways in which we make the decisions about what projects we'll support. It's not simply based on need.

STEELE: Ms. Capeling, strategically you've lobbied very hard in the last year to integrate women's concerns particularly with regard to the environment and the build-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. At the end of the day when you get to Rio de Janeiro in June, will there be an Earth Charter which adequately reflects women's interests? Are you confident that something will have come from your labours over the past year or more?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Well, the optimist in me would say yes and that little voice of cynicism in the back of my mind makes me wonder whether in fact women's concerns will be on the back burner in Rio. I'm cautiously optimistic because there has been a massive effort

on the part of many women -- women within the United Nations system, women within NGOs and women who are working in the UNCED Secretariat itself to get this issue incorporated. Women on delegations of member states and in fact we have been joined by some very important men in that effort. There is now a paper which has gone through the UNCED process, the preparatory meeting which has been approved now by all delegations which very clearly outlines a role for women in the post-UNCED activities in financing and follow-up. In addition to that, the issues of women in environment and development have been, if I can use a jargon term, "mainstreamed" into a lot of the other papers on water and on forestry and on land resources and so on. So there is some hope that women will be not only a separate issue but also integrated into some of the other mainstream issues at the Conference. However, the crunch is really the institutions that will be established following the earth summit and also the financing and here, the voice of cynicism in the back of my mind raises the big question: will we really change the institutions that today have been managing development so that they manage development in a way that women not only benefit from it but participate in the decisions. And of course, will the money follow that and where's the money coming from -- that's the next question.

LITTLEJOHNS: What you're saying is that it is management of the emphasis on man.

LESSING: Not wanting to beat the question to death but how do you include the indigenous peoples and particularly indigenous women who may be literate, they may be illiterate but they know a great deal about the environment and in a sense they're very much in tune with what you can do and how you can exploit the land and how you shouldn't exploit the land. How can UNIFEM tap into that and how can that help the whole world picture of environment and sustainable development?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Well, you're quite correct to highlight the role that women play as managers of the world resource base. In fact, in many developing countries particularly now that men have migrated away from the rural areas in search of cash income elsewhere, the management of the eco-system is almost entirely in the hands of women and many of these women carry with them traditional knowledge in how to manage this resource base. In studies it has been shown an analysis that women in fact have been experimenters, they have developed whole ranges of farming techniques. Women are credited with domesticating animals, with crop rotation, with mulching and in fact it was women who first experimented in using ash as fertilizer. These are all elements of sustainable agriculture and are essential in much of the developing world in order to manage this resource base effectively. What we've been doing about that, particularly together with United Nations Environment Programme, has been to support the development of case studies. We now have about 200 case studies documented and practitioners, grassroots women from all over the world were brought together in Miami last November to present the cases of sustainable agricultural development and also urban sanitation management from all over the world and these had been written up and documented and now we are attempting to bring those cases to the attention of donors both in the multi-lateral and bi-lateral and as well with NGOs. So that these success stories -- and there are many of them -- can be replicated over and over again to support the environmental development.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE**. Our guest is Sharon Capeling-Alakija, Director of the UN Development Fund for Women.

FASULO: Is there any particular success story that you might be able to share with us?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: There are two that I like to talk about. One is an urban story and that is in Bamako, Mali where a group of unemployed women got together. They had very few prospects and with some scant funds, two garbage trucks which were donated by UNIFEM and a training programme, these women have successfully established a garbage collection business and are now providing sanitation services for 18,000 urban poor in Bamako and very recently at a conference of professional and business women in Nairobi, UNIFEM presented this case study to business and professional women from all over the developing world as well as the industrialized world and we were besieged with requests from African women from a variety of other countries -- business women who saw that urban sanitation could be good business and so we are very optimistic that this one successful model which really I think was an investment of about $80,00 from UNIFEM will be replicated inn many African cities in the near future. Another example from the rural areas was in India and this was a case where we were involving women -- it was initially an income-generating project where we involve women in sericulture which is the production of silk. In order to feed the silk worms, you plant mulberry trees and the silk worms eat the leaves of the mulberry trees. By working with women's organizations, training them and working with them, we were able to get them to begin to inter-crop nitrogen-rich vegetables between the mulberry trees. This began to produce an eco-system where the nitrogen improved the soil which made the mulberry trees grow better which meant they could expand their silk production. At the same time, you're producing vegetables for consumption. Normally when you get into producing vegetables, women are forced to sell the vegetables because they have no other income and that does not improve nutrition but in this case, they had income from the silk production and they were able to use the vegetables for domestic consumption and you could really begin to see in the faces of children, children who now, by the way, can go to school because their mothers can afford school fees and uniforms

but you also see much healthier and nutritious families and this particular small example of how you can do income-generation in a way that is agriculturally sustainable and which also improves quality of human life is now going to be replicated by the World Bank which is involved in a sericulture project in India in 17 states including Rajasthan which is where the UNIFEM project was. And so we went down to the World Bank when we found out they were going to be doing this project in India, presented our case and they have invited UNIFEM to train all of the World Bank employees who will be involved in this much larger project. In fact the first phase of training is now already completed so we can hope that this one small example -- again this project was $83,000. -- will be replicated. Our project really improved the lives of about 300 families. I can hope that with the World Bank scaling this approach up, we'll touch the lives of millions of Indians.

STEELE: Ms. Capeling, looking beyond the environment conference, who will bridge the gap between these women in the fields and the decision makers? Who are the intermediaries and who will carry the message? Is it such a long step between women who have no voice and those who make the decisions who are largely men. Do you have a large non-governmental constituency? Who are the people who will interact and move some of the words into decisions?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: That's a very important question and absolutely vital to making things work is the role of the non-governmental organizations. UNIFEM has a very strong relationship with non-governmental organizations because in fact that's where the women are. Very few women have managed to get themselves into either government bureaucracies or into political office in developing countries so 48 percent of our projects in fact worldwide are executed by non-governmental organizations and of course, it's a long way from New York to Udaipur in Rajasthan, India, and for us to really be able to ensure that the dollars that we are directing

towards women who live in poverty, we need to work through intermediary groups and frequently the most effective intermediary groups are non-governmental organizations and they play a very important role. I think one of the things that UNIFEM can do is also be an advocate for NGOs with government and at the same time be an advocate for government with non-governmental organizations. I think that many of us have learned through our years of experience -- my own experience was in the non-governmental sector -- that in the end you must change the mainstream system. Setting up a parallel system is not going to lead to sustainable change so that ultimately, you need to actually change the mainstream system. On the other hand, in order to do that, governments, inter-governmental organizations, need to work through the people who have proven themselves to be the most innovative and effective at reaching these people and that's the non-governmental organizations and I would say, in fact, we owe it to the NGO sector that the environment is on the global agenda now. I think this is one of their great success stories because I think it was really the NGOs who lobbied to get this issue back onto the global agenda.

STEELE: Do you see any change in the male political culture vis-a-vis women in developing countries or is it all language and repetition of UN-style documentation?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: I'm beginning to gradually see some movement here. Again, I suppose for me to get up every day and go to work and so on, I need to have some sense of progress and optimism. Usually you get your optimism by looking back because looking forward the distance we still have to go seems so far but I think the food crisis in Africa for instance has really made policy-makers sit and think about what has been going on and what went wrong and I think Africa is a classic example. A continent that should be feeding itself which has the agricultural resources to do so and yet after three years of the development decade we have the

spectre of famine. All the regions of Africa have been touched by it and a lot of that famine is due to a long and sustained environmental degradation. It's due also to heavy drought and of course one of the causes of drought has been deforestation and abuse of the environment and poor agricultural practices that have turned what once was grazing land into desert. So I think also when we look at agricultural policy where all the extension services, the improved technologies and agricultural inputs have been directed towards cash crops and not at food crops which is what women actually produce. Ultimately after three decades of development, we see in fact the under-development of agriculture in Africa and I would maintain that that is because the agricultural resources were being directed in the wrong way and I think policy-makers are gradually beginning to understand if 80 percent of the food that is consumed in the continent is produced by women, if you don't give women the tools to do the job then you're going to end up with what we now see before us so I think policy-makers are beginning to understand this.

LESSING: How can you help those people in the developed world who have some interest in helping their sisters in the non-developed or the developing world? Is there some channel that people can go through? Do you have projects or ideas that you can share with these people so that they can be genuinely helpful?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: In fact one of UNIFEM's major approaches with respect to advocacy is to build linkages and bridges between women in the north and in the south. There is much that divides us and we cannot gloss over those things. There are issues of age and class, religion, political ideology and so on that in fact divide us but there is much that unite us as women as well and so we have tried to look for those commonalities and build on them. UNIFEM has a growing constituency of national committees in the industrialized countries -- we now have 13 national committees in

13 industrialized countries and 7 more in the process of being established. These national committees -- their first job is to do development education work in those countries with respect to women and development and also to promote UNIFEM in the issues that UNIFEM is raising in their own countries and we also arrange opportunities. They raise money for our projects, adopt specific projects and occasionally have the opportunity to go on study tours to developing countries to see and work with some of the women that we are working with in the developing world. So this is a growing and I think a very important part of our building of a constituency in the industrialized world.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms Capeling, I think that UNIFEM is a fairly new agency in the UN system. How long have you been around?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Well in fact UNIFEM is new and it's also one of the few parts of the UN system that has grown out of a social movement because in fact it was women who created UNIFEM. It began as a fund for the Decade for Women in Mexico City in 1975, it was really women literally lobbying in the hotel lobbies and hotel rooms and finally from the podium of that conference that established this fund for the Decade but as the Decade drew to a close in 1984, again it was women in the General Assembly who pressed this fund to continue beyond 1985 and become an on-going fund for women and so a General Assembly resolution was passed in 1984 establishing this as the United Nations Development Fund for Women, given the name UNIFEM.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Capeling-Alakija, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE.** Our guest has been Sharon Capeling-Alakija, Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, UNIFEM.

She was interviewed here at United Nations

headquarters in New York by Linda Fasulo of National Public Radio; Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia and; Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

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